

The Death of Garrison Station

A Combined Review and Mission Report for Matrix Games' **Starshatter**

by **Cat**

Dragon wouldn't get away this time, Elena mused. Not this time.

She closed her eyes tightly and squeezed the bridge of her aristocratic nose, trying to ignore the migraine headache slowly building at the back of her head. She was tired. And she wasn't the only one. The war had gone on far too long. Force:Space was far from its bases, and Operation Nightfall had brought them too deep into Marakan space for her personal comfort. She raked wispy blonde bangs back off her forehead for what seemed like the hundredth time and made a mental note to visit *Devastator's* barber the first chance she got.

More documents scrolled past on the padd propped up on her desk. The life of the boss, she thought sourly. She was still trying to complete the Report to the Court of Inquiry on Thrale, to detail *Vance's* loss in Isham system the month before. *I told them not to send an Asher DD to screen three cruisers.*

Her Fifth Battle Squadron had been tasked to take out an enemy cruiser, and in Relay orbit instead had happened upon a true pearl of great price: an enemy carrier. CV *Serpent*, a *Dragon* class carrier all alone and unprotected since its escorts were destroyed. *Serpent's* objective was the Terellian CV *Orion*, the center of Force:Space's First Fleet and the one ship that had to be protected at all costs. Abandoning the search for the Marakan cruiser, Elena had snapped an order to *Devastator's* Pilot and told off the cruiser's Tactical Action Officer to get her consorts *Steadfast* and *Dauntless* in line. *Vance* had been detailed to escort and screen the flagship against fighters, not to join the battle line.

Busy commanding her own ship against an inbound fighter squadron-at first, she'd thought them to be from *Serpent* — as well as directing *Dauntless* and *Steadfast*, Elena hadn't seen *Vance* depart station and engage two Volnaris class destroyers, part of CV *Dragon's* coterie. *Dragon* wasn't supposed to be in-system, but apparently had joined *Serpent* in the attack on *Orion*. *Dragon* quantum-jumped away as *Devastator* wheeled and fired a swarm of thermonuclear-tipped Athena torpedoes at her, but her escorts remained behind. *Alin Volnaris* herself killed *Vance* with well-placed torpedoes before *Devastator* could match velocities and give the enemy something else to think about. No matter that *Volnaris* too died quickly at the tips of *Devastator's* gamma-ray lasers and Athenas. As had *Serpent*, when the carrier had quantum-jumped to the next orbit toward Isham's sun, and Elena, ordering her consorts to the pursuit, guessed *Serpent's* escape-haven right. The two *Courageous* class cruisers had killed the enemy carrier before *Devastator* even made it into the area. And then Elena'd had to report to Vice Admiral Evars aboard *Orion* on their return to Relay orbit after the action and account for why they'd lost the destroyer. And she'd taken it on herself to write to each of the families of *Vance's* one hundred and thirty sailors.

She'd lobbied Admiral Evars ever since for a chance to finish *Dragon* off. They'd pursued her all through Marakan space, killing her remaining escorts one by one and now Force:Intel's agents had her as alone as *Serpent* had been. And in Garrison system, as were Force:Space's First and Second Fleets; Both the *Orion* and *Antares* task forces were here, with the goal of killing Garrison Station, the Marakan fortress where their scientists were rumored to be developing a super-weapon. This was the Terellians' absolute top priority. But before Garrison Station could be assaulted, they had to do something about the relentless fighters. The ground-based ones were bad enough. But the naval fighters, those the battle-fleet could do something about. The order went out to kill *Dragon*, and Elena was finished with her plan.

Waypoint One would be the rally point, where *Devastator*, *Dauntless*, and *Steadfast* would gather before setting off for *Dragon's* last known location. Garrison Station was somewhere in that area, but the Marakans' heavy sensor jamming

made it impossible to locate for sure. Regardless, she could read between the lines and knew that *Orion's* tactical fighter wing was itching to get its F/A-38 Thunderbolts into an attack on the heavily defended station. It would be suicide for the fighters alone, without heavy support. Garrison Station was equipped with its own fighters, and on top of that was armed like a cruiser itself.

She awoke feeling refreshed; the cruiser's medic had given her something for the headache and she carefully buttoned herself into the high-necked, deep blue broadcloth Terellian naval uniform, with its silver piping and the bright silver shoulderboards with the single golden star signifying her rank, Commodore. Eligible for battle command of anything in Force:Space's arsenal, including a carrier group. Elena was a pilot by training, as were all Force:Space recruits. Her first assignment had been in Operation Highland, the Solus-Renser guerilla wars against the Dantari separatists who had taken over the Independent Solus Fleet. She'd flown F-32 Falcons in particular, and as a Lieutenant had commanded CV *Archon's* tactical fighter wing. In Renser system Elena Nakhimova led her outmatched Falcons against a Dantari frigate that had maneuvered itself into position to attack *Archon* by stealth, and driven it off with her MRM "Javelin" missiles, winning the Flight Medal in the process. That was Force's highest award for a pilot, and it outranked a lot of other medals. Even the Gold Star she'd won during Operation Firestorm, in command of cruiser *Justice* years later, at Kolchev. Her first cruiser command, *Justice* had taken out an entire destroyer squadron alone, prompting the cruiser group's commander to whisper in awe, "who says there's no *Justice*?" as the battle staff watched the action on their holographic displays, the *Devastator*-class flagship too far out to help.

Her aide brought breakfast for her, and she asked him to pass the word for the battle staff to assemble in *Devastator's* command center after the morning meal. It would be action stations-stand easy after the crew finished eating. She ate, thinking of past actions. Operation Shining Fortress had been the most difficult of her career, personally, and professionally. The Marakans had attacked across the Solus-Renser frontier, into the heart of Terellian space. Two fleets were all that stood between the Marakan advance and the Terellian home worlds. She'd asked for a destroyer command, and been refused. And when she'd received her commission as Lieutenant Commander, CV *Hyperion's* 22d Tactical Fighter Wing needed an air group chief more than the destroyers under Evars's command had needed a captain. And Elena had gained notoriety as Force desperately fought to defend the Terellian home systems. They'd waited too long to evacuate Athenar, and war took that center of Terellian culture by surprise. The destruction of a heavily damaged Marakan *Broadsword*-class destroyer under her F-36 Stormhawk's guns, in Athenar orbit, as the learned and artistic Athenars watched, horrified, through the tri-dee, had earned her a measure of public acclaim, the Distinguished Service Cross, and command of the destroyer *Gamma*.

Now, the shoe was on the other foot. It was Force:Space that was advancing into Marakan space, and Operation Nightfall was intended to drive the last nail into the Marakan coffin. They searched for an ancient artifact and a rare substance that could be used to assemble a terrible weapon, and the Marakans couldn't be allowed to have that. Now, the war was come to Garrison, one of the Marakan Hegemony's core systems. Elena now led a full cruiser group, and she commanded a powerful ship.

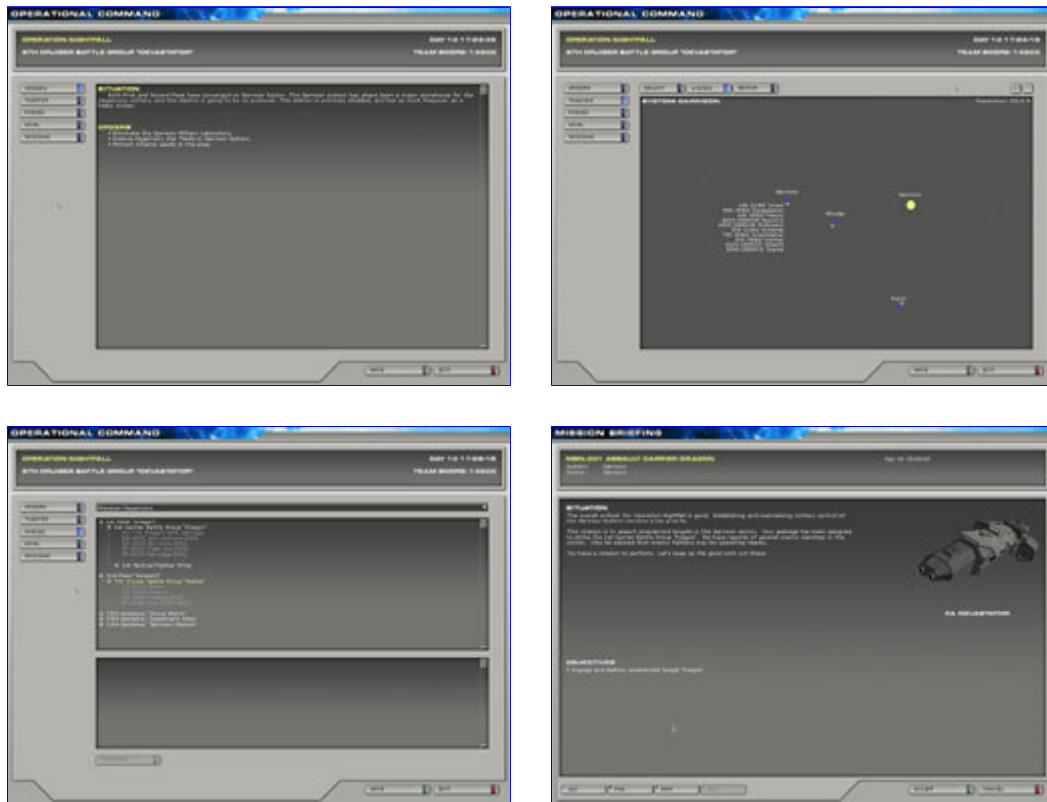
CA-400 *Devastator* was lead ship of her class. Much of the First Fleet was composed of the name ships of their class. CA *Courageous* and the destroyers *Wraith* and *Asher*, themselves the lead ships of their classes, were screening CV *Orion*-the first and oldest carrier of her generation! Old, the *Devastators* were not as highly regarded in Force as the later and more numerous *Courageous* class, lacking serious anti-fighter protection. But they did have the obsolescent, yet highly effective Athena torpedoes and heavy gamma-ray lasers, both with greater punch than the Nike tactical nukes and dual X-ray lasers of the *Courageous* type. The X-ray laser was actually a destroyer weapon, found in quadruple emplacements in the *Asher* and much more powerful *Wraith* class destroyers, employed on the *Courageous* cruisers for its cheaper construction and higher firing rate. But the gamma-ray laser, known colloquially as the 'graser,' could tear apart a Solusan *Baikal*-class frigate with just a few shots, even a shielded one.



Elena's meal finished, she pulled on her highly-polished boots and strode through narrow corridors to the command

center. The boatswain's mate of the watch barked "Captain on the bridge!" as she entered. They stiffened to attention, alert to her presence, ready to fight. She nodded her approval and focused her attention on the Tactical Action Officer. "As you were, people. TAO, our orders?"

Commander Grimes, the TAO, smiled a wolfish smile at her. "*Dragon*. Search, and eliminate."



"Excellent. Pilot, ahead two-thirds. Set course 090 for first waypoint, zero angle. TAO, advise *Dauntless* and *Steadfast* to form up. Weapons officer, set grasers and Athena battery to automatic. Point-defense emplacements to defend the ship. Graviton shield at fifty percent. All ships, weapons free." The Group readied itself for action as it approached the first waypoint. With hand-optical gear, Elena and the bridge lookouts scanned space around them, carefully peering out of the transparent, heavily armored shell of the command platform high on *Devastator's* prow. The effectiveness of the Marakan jamming gear rendered the fleet sensor net useless for long-range detection without prodigious use of sensor probes, which themselves gave away what the attacker was interested in. Elena tried not to use those. Often, the Mk. 1 Eyeball could pick out a shape, bright against the fluorescent background of gases limning most of the inner Marakan systems. Or see anticollision lights, intended to warn compatriots, a giveaway to enemies. One of these would change the mission today.

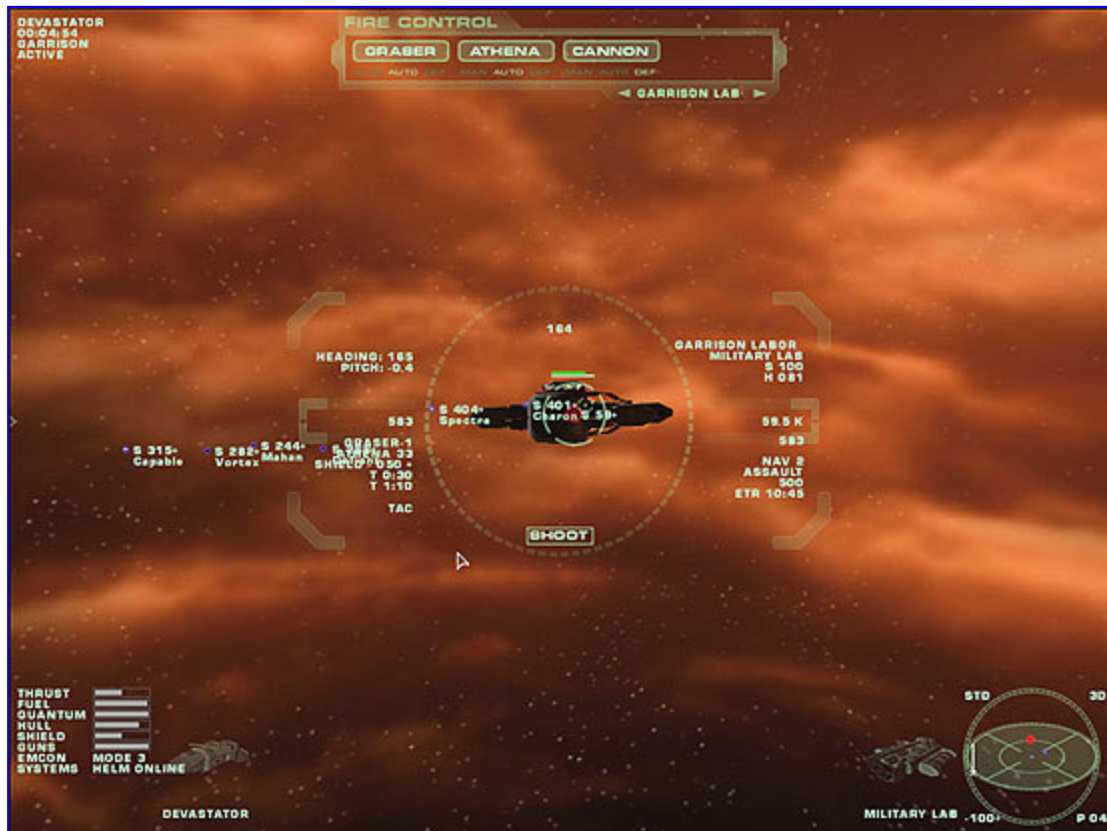
"*Steadfast* reports a large object bearing 164, distance unknown."

All eyes turned to that bearing, seeing a bulky object against the nebula gases. "The carrier? No, that's the wrong shape..." Grimes sounded confused. As the battle staff plotted the object's location, *Steadfast's* TAO came up on the squadron net. "*Steadfast* engaging Garrison Station."



Elena focused her optics carefully, following the trace of her consort's opening salvo of Nike missiles, to the unknown object. It was a station of some sort, and its lack of IFF meant it was enemy, without a doubt!

"Defense, shields one hundred percent! Communicator, sound action stations! Stand by to disconnect artificial gravity; Bosun's Mate of the Watch, sound thirty-second alarm. Pilot, alter course to 164, three degree down angle, all ahead one third. TAO, advise *Dauntless*, engage Garrison Station!"



The action-stations gong began ringing its low, repetitive, urgent call to arms as Elena concentrated on the three-dimensional, multicolored display on her screen. They were in range of the ship's most powerful weapons. The launch coordinator's measured tones sounded in her earpiece. "Locking Athena, ready tubes one through four, launch consent."



Over the intercom, the torpedo control room responded as the crews rushed to set up for *Devastator's* first shot. Forty-eight thermonuclear missiles stood ready in the Athena magazine to unleash the power of a sun upon the hapless, oblivious Marakan battle station, which was concentrating its defensive fire on *Steadfast*, approaching from ninety degrees offset to *Devastator* and *Dauntless*.





On *Steadfast*, the orange beams of her forward X-ray lasers played over Garrison Station, and on her command platform the automatic filters darkened to shield the command staff from the coruscating brilliance as three Nikes detonated almost as they left their tubes, victims of red, raining energy bolts from the station's defensive batteries.



She shook under the crew's feet, Garrison Station's concentrated fire pouring into her screens, absorbing the tremendous impact. And *Devastator*, rushing to draw some of the fire, hoping to protect her embattled consort, was closing the station too fast! She'd be unable to bring her forward-mounted main energy weapons, the grasers, to bear soon without ramming the station. Elena grabbed an overhead handrail and barked an order.

"Pilot, helm hard over!"

The ship heeled, nose swinging hard left away from its target, inertia crushing the battle staff into their acceleration couches.



Blue-white streaks from *Devastator* and *Dauntless* now, Athena and Nike missiles impacting over the station's structure.

Half of its defensive batteries disengaged from *Steadfast*, focused red death on *Devastator*, now presenting her vulnerable flank to the station's gunners for their revenge. The old cruiser quaked under Elena; she grabbed at the handrail over her head again for support. "TAO, contact *Orion*, advise our location! Request assault fighter scramble!"

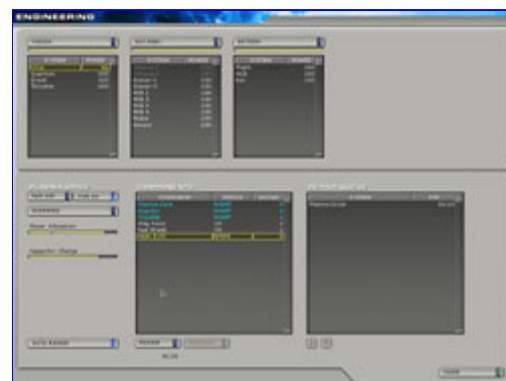
Dark blue gamma-ray laser beams again impacted the station, causing its failing graviton shield to coruscate as *Devastator* steadied back on course, and a telltale in an overhead console began winking at Elena, followed by an alarm. "Number two point-defense cannon, Commodore! Its beam generator is overheating!" The ship lurched. "Damage to auxiliary reactor! Athena No. 1 down to 93 percent power!"

"Get the forward damage control party on it! Advise the Engineer to cut power to Athena batteries on my mark!" They were down to half their complement of missiles now. She scanned the overhead display, saw red traces in space all around the station, the tactical computer warning of enemy ships. "Incoming fighters, people-point defense stand ready! Damage control, I want the repair to the number two PDB to have priority, acknowledge."

The bosun's whistle sounded, the Engineer's worried voice cutting in. "Conn, Engineer, the impulse drive is down to 83 percent power from that last series, and I've had to take half the injectors and the impeller off line. We'll lose the main heat exchanger with another hit, can you keep the forward shields to the enemy?"

Elena toggled into the circuit. "We're going to do just that, Kaplan, can you give me an estimate on time to repair? We've got fighters inbound and we need full power restored as soon as possible!"

"Two minutes, Conn, if you can keep the fire off the aft shields!"



“Conn, Sensor, advise Garrison Station now heavily damaged, losing reactor integrity.” The sensor station monitored the target, and the Group’s concentrated fire was having the desired effect.

Elena put her optics to her eyes, focusing on *Dauntless*. The cruiser had assumed position ahead of *Devastator*, to bring her point-defense battery into play on the station. She is too close, Elena thought suddenly. If the station goes now, *Dauntless* will go with it! She sprang into action. “TAO, contact *Dauntless*. Advise them to move patrol thirty kilometers off, near our position.”



The enemy fighters were close now, and *Devastator* and *Dauntless* both poured fire on them from their midship point-defense turrets. Suddenly, the tactical display filled with blue streaks, approaching fast. “We’ve got air cover! Antares’s launched!” Commander Grimes was jubilant.



“Bravo flight, this is Bravo 1. Engaging Narom 1. Vector 200 for 21 kilometers.” And the rest of the Fleet was getting into the act as well. *Suffolk*, a Berents class fighter-defense frigate, engaged enemy fighters, and *Mahan*, a nearby *Asher* class destroyer, took the station under fire with her X-ray lasers, positioning ninety degrees off from *Devastator* and *Dauntless*.



Parker, another nearby frigate, joined in with her Mk-7 interceptors, sending swarms of missiles at the attacking enemy fighters.

"Mustang flight, this is Mustang 2. Engaging Garrison Station." Thunderbolts from *Antares*, the closest carrier to them, firing Harpoon missiles.

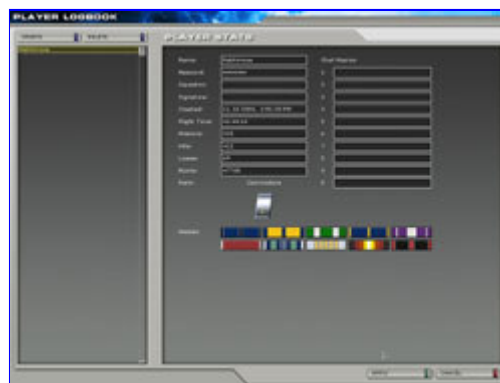
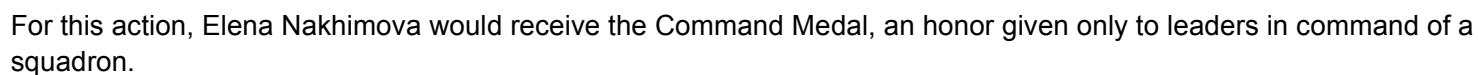


The fighter frantically maneuvered after missile release, skating over the massive bulk of the enemy structure, finally dying in a blaze of orange flame as enemy point-defense batteries enveloped it in a host of red energy bolts.



On *Devastator*, Elena was deep in consultation with the Sensor plotter. Garrison Station was in its death throes. Both *Devastator* and *Steadfast* were too close. *Dauntless* had withdrawn to sixty kilometers and was covering the flagship against further fighter attacks. "Pilot, reverse engines, make turns for one hundred thirty kps. "TAO, advise *Steadfast* to withdraw to seventy-five kilometers."

On screen, Mahan was continuing to pound the station with her X-ray lasers, and *Devastator* with her twin grasers. *Steadfast* gracefully wheeled to withdraw, as did *Parker*, gracefully wheeling over the dying station with her engines at full power, trying to get to *Devastator*'s position. The cruiser's engines pulled her astern as she continued to fire, and with one final salvo from *Devastator*'s grasers the station could take no more. It lit Garrison system with the flare of a dying sun as its reactors went super-critical.



The time is five thousand years from now. The place: a band of populous star systems five hundred parsecs from Earth. After centuries spent colonizing the Solar planets, the human civilization that was born on Earth left that birthplace for the stars. The galaxy has become dotted with human colonies and laced with trade empires. First contacts have been made with a few rare alien civilizations. For a thousand years, there has been peaceful expansion. But nothing lasts forever...

Welcome to the next generation of space combat simulation. Starshatter extends the gameplay concepts of the classics by combining fighter and starship combat in a single game. You will begin your career as a fighter pilot, performing patrol and strike missions in deep space as well as on the ground. As you progress through the game, you can earn promotions until you are commanding a massive fleet carrier with three wings of fighters and a complete escort of warships. Starshatter includes airborne fighter combat as a major game component, allowing you to take off and land at planetary bases, engage in aerial dogfights, and use air-to-ground missiles to destroy ground targets.

Starshatter also integrates elements of real time strategy games by allowing fleet commanders to direct the battle on a tactical level, launching fighters and directing destroyers to defend the fleet and annihilate enemy forces. You will arm fighters for patrol or strike missions. You will send orders to your escorting destroyers and cruisers to engage enemy starships or defend the fleet from attack by enemy fighters. You are the admiral, and you decide how to employ all of your forces in battle. It is all up to you.

That's the back-story that John DiCamillo of Destroyer Studios designed for his recent release, the space-combat game Starshatter. I clipped it from the PDF manual that ships with the game. It really does describe what you can do in the game, too — it's not just hype. And I've been playing Starshatter since about a week after its initial release. The game is now at version 4.0.2, its second patch. DiCamillo is continuing his efforts to update and improve the game. It gets better with every patch release and is already more stable than many large-house releases were in final form. This is a remarkable achievement, considering that he is basically alone in his effort to produce it. He does not have a large team to support him. Starshatter has been in development since 1997 thanks to this.

Most of you will find its DX-7, low-polygon graphics a little antiquated, but you'll also find that they get the job done in fine style. The game is graphically pleasant and does what it does well, graphically speaking. Further, it does so while barely taxing today's high-end, fast systems. Recommended system for Starshatter is a Pentium III / 700, 512mb RAM, 300mb available disk space, DX7 or better, and at least a GeForce 2 board. Most gamers have better already. Any modern machine can run Starshatter at 1024x768 with FSAA and aniso filtering full out, and get a really pretty look.

The mission on the previous pages comes from the last of five dynamic — yes, you read that right — dynamic campaigns within the game. The campaigns take you from a guerilla war to the defense of the Terellian Alliance, then into the heart of enemy space. You'll confront multiple types of enemy ships from fighters to carriers, and you can choose your own poison from piloting fighters off a space-borne aircraft carrier to commanding a squadron of heavy cruisers in action against an enemy fleet.

Flight modeling is best when one considers the heaviest ships — cruisers and destroyers. They move like large, inertia-laden vessels should. If you've played games like Independence War, you'll be right at home with Starshatter. It models spaceborne fighters equally well, with a six-degrees of freedom, Newtonian-physics flight model that allows you to perform great Babylon-5 style maneuvers. Ever wanted to do the Commander Sheridan thing and flip your Star Fury end-to-end, blasting the enemy while traveling in a totally different direction? You can do it here; I did it in the first campaign with a Falcon, one of three flyable Terellian fighters. And enemy AI is pretty darn good — especially for the larger ships. DiCamillo has also taken pains with the larger ships to model things like damage control and systems — you can target specific systems in enemy ships, and they all have repair times. There is a screen you bring up to queue repairs that reminds me of seaborne ship sims like the *Great Naval Battles* series. For me, Starshatter's greatest fun is in navigating a battlecruiser in combat and directing its consorts against an enemy fleet. I believe that is where its greatest strengths as a game lie.

If you want to build-your-own game, go with God, my friend, because Starshatter comes with a full SDK for modders. You can build your own ships, missions, full out total conversions, even. The only thing lacking is a way to edit the order of battle in the dynamic campaign; you can't take your creations into battle in the campaign, but you can build killer missions to fly them in the game's very detailed single-mission editor.

The game's weaknesses are largely in its atmospheric flight modeling-that's pretty wonky, feeling like you're flying a large brick at all times. Also, there's a total lack of detail on the ground, and an apparent lack of gravity from planetary objects in space. You're doing most of your work in planetary orbit, with moons around, and you don't really see celestial bodies having much of an effect on flight. You won't be doing slingshot maneuvers around planets or moons here. Also, the transition from space to atmosphere for fighters is via cutout, and so you can't do things like bounce off a planet's atmosphere. I'd like to see these things modeled in a space sim; when one is damaged, falling into a gravity well should be a real concern! There also is no way to bombard planetary starbases from orbit; one would think an advanced star fleet could do that. And you're flying in HUD view, what most simmers deride as "flying a camera." It works well for the big ships, but lacks reference points for fighters. I'd like to see some form of 3d art there, and be able to see the structure of the fighter around me, for reference in combat. There is no real virtual cockpit, though DiCamillo has taken gamers' requests into account and given a slewable camera view in-cockpit that works pretty well. Also, large ships didn't repair damaged hulls between missions until version 4.0.2-forcing you to take very heavily damaged starships that logic dictated should be withdrawn for repairs-into combat to be destroyed. DiCamillo has instituted limited hull repairs now between missions and it's been a boon for me.

These penny-ante concerns aside, it's fun. That's all. The concerns I've listed above don't translate to the entire game; I finished Operation Nightfall without ever stepping into a fighter once and thus never dealt with space-to-ground attacks in the last campaign. I would like to see an ability to repair damaged ships more comprehensively than we see now, perhaps from the in-game damage-control menu, and the ability to take a favored starship from campaign to campaign; I get attached to a particular ship and miss her in subsequent campaigns. If you ever thought someone should do a space sim that's not a silly *Wing Commander* and more of a flight-sim-based game (I wish *someone* would do a *Mechwarrior* or *MechCommander* with a dynamic, mission-based campaign), then do yourself a favor and buy this one. It's forty bucks through Matrix Games, and ten additional dollars if you have Digital River send you the backup CD. It's the most fun fifty bucks I've spent since Total Air War came out in 1998.

System Specs

- AMD Athlon 3000+ processor
 - MachSpeed N2PAP-Lite motherboard with onboard Aureal AC97 sound
 - PNY Technologies Verto GeForce FX 5950 Ultra
 - 1GB Kingston PC2700 DDR DRAM
 - Creative 12x CD-ROM
 - Maxtor 40GB main drive
 - DirectX Version 9.0a
 - Windows 2000 with SP4
 - Thrustmaster Fox2 Pro USB joystick
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